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AUTHOR Stephens, E. Robert; Haughey, Charles F.

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ABSTRACT

In many states, rural school districts or interested individuals have formed statewide interest groups to influence policy decisions related to rural education. Potential state rural education interest groups were identified through contacts with national and regional education associations and regional educational laboratories. Of 19 identified groups, 13 responded to a survey concerning their goals, operations, and organizational characteristics. Respondent groups had been established between 1974 and 1992. Common purposes include serving as state advocates for rural education, developing and promoting state rural education policies, offering technical assistance to rural educators, and engaging in research and analysis of contemporary issues facing rural education. Findings also covered organizational governance, affiliations with other organizations, composition and size of membership, dues structure, role of the executive officer, other salaried staff, use of contracted services, office or other housing, programs and services, annual budget, sources of revenue, and special assessments. Analysis of the results suggests that the great majority of groups have a common vision and are strongly committed to their mission. However, with a few noteworthy exceptions, the capacity of most groups to exert influence is seriously constrained by inadequate size, lack of adequate and definite financial support, and lack of adequate management and leadership support system. Such deficiencies may be remedied as these very young organizations mature. (SV)

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ORGANIZATIONAL AND OPERATIONAL FEATURES OF STATE RURAL EDUCATION INTEREST GROUPS

E. Robert Stephens, Professor
Department of Education Policy, Planning and Administration
University of Maryland, College Park

Charles F. Haughey
Haughey Associates
Education Planning and Information Services
Rockville, Maryland

Presented at

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SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

The propensity of Americans to form an advocacy group to address commonly held interests has been commented on by many observers. This deeply ingrained tradition in large part reflects the pluralistic nature of American society. While estimates of the number of existing interest groups at the national, state, and local levels vary widely, it is generally thought that their numbers are in the thousands, have increased appreciably in recent years, and that such groups are now to be found in virtually all facets of the nation's social, economic, and political life. A majority of interest groups appear to be organized on the basis of common economic objectives. The prevalence of ideological, a combination of economic-ideological, and minority interest groups, however, appears to be growing, particularly in the most recent decades. Though this broad typology has clear limitations, it probably serves as a useful approximation of the primary foci of a majority of the thousands of advocacy groups now functioning at all levels of government. Indeed, the accelerated growth of special interest groups in this country has led some to designate them as representing a form of "private government", ostensibly enjoying the same status as public sector interests.

Education interest groups are also to be found in large numbers in the nation's capital, in the several states, and in many local communities, especially in larger population centers. The formation of interest groups in the field of education is a much later development than in other fields, in part reflecting the now discredited but previously widely-held proposition that education must somehow be immune

from political controversy. The classification of education interest groups is comparably broad. Campbell, Cunningham, and McPhee's (1965) early practice of separating interest groups on the basis of those that are essentially supportive of education and those that are generally nonsupportive is one typology that continues to have utility. Others of course have also proposed ways of typing the multitude of advocacy groups attempting to shape education policy. Spring's (1993) recent work, for example, classifies the special interest groups in education into three categories: what he refers to as "the big three" (foundations, teachers' unions, corporate sector), education interest groups, and single-interest groups (p. 3).

Rural education interests in many states across the country seemingly have joined the movement to create an organization to represent their concerns. One indication of this is the relatively large number of new state rural education interest groups formed in recent years that are now affiliated with the National Rural Education Association (NREA), the oldest, and presently the single, national organization representing rural education. Most of the state rural organizations were organized during the past decade.

There is at present little comparative information on these emerging state rural education advocacy groups. Nachtigal's (1991) work, that will be reviewed below, does provide a description of selected organizational features of several of what he describes as "grassroots" state groups, along with a useful analysis of factors that he believes have given rise to their formulation.

Objectives of Paper

This paper is a report on what is intended to be a series of efforts to better understand the workings of what appears to be a major movement in many states across the country to create a special interest group representing rural education. The ultimate goal of the project is to establish the mission of these groups, describe how they organize themselves to achieve their mission, identify the agenda they are pursuing, and, ultimately, attempt to identify the conditions that seem to facilitate or inhibit the achievement of their policy goals and program objectives.

The emphasis of this first phase of the planned multiphased activity gives particular attention to a description of organizational and operational features of state rural education interest groups. Questions pursued here center on the following:

- the year they were formed, composition of membership, and membership eligibility requirements, if any
- governance and policy making features
- the major roles and functions of executive directors, where these are designated, other staffing arrangements, and the nature and extent of use of contracted services
- arrangements used to house the activities of the organizations
- programs and services offered by the organizations
- the annual budgets of the groups, and their sources of revenues
- the nature and extent of use of special membership assessments

Our focus here on a comparative description of what would generally be viewed as basic organizational and operational features should prove

to be of value to individuals in states having an existing organization as well as those in other states contemplating the creation of a similar organization. Our primary interest for focusing on a comparative description of current organizational and operational practices of existing organizations, however, is intended as well to set the stage for two subsequent phases of our work:

- the formulation of tentative research hypotheses that hold promise for providing a better understanding of the conditions that seem to both promote as well as inhibit the success of state rural education interest groups in achieving their goals
- the selection of a small number of state groups for in-depth case study analysis in order to test the research hypotheses.

Our Working Definition of a State Interest Group

The working definition of a state rural education interest group used here is purposefully very broad, consistent with the general practice found in the literature and in general usage. We define these groups as:

> an independent, formally structured organization that represents rural school districts or one that represents individuals in a state who share common interests in rural education and who attempt to influence and shape policy decisions that promote their interests.

We prefer to use the term "interest group" rather than other popular terms employed to designate organizations that seek to influence the decisions made in the political arena (e.g., pressure groups)

primarily because of its more neutral meaning, as Monsma (1969) and others have argued. Moreover, our prior knowledge of the workings of some state rural education organizations would indicate that they are engaged in many other activities to shape policy decisions other than "putting pressure on policy makers."

Procedures Used

An overview of the major procedures used in the conduct of Phase I of the project is provided below.

Development of Survey Instrument. Initial work on the survey instrument used in Phase I consisted of conducting several interviews with a number of executive officers of state organizations and others for the purpose of discovering what questions were of importance to them regarding the organizational and operational features of state rural education interest groups. These sessions proved to be valuable in suggesting the nature of issues to be probed in a comparative descriptive study of the type planned here.

Also of special value in the construction of the survey instrument was one of the early reports of the Education Research Service (Profiles of State Associations of School Administrators, 1980). This report, one of a continuing series of efforts undertaken by the Education Research Service to report on the workings of state associations of school administrators, provides a comprehensive description of a large number of the same high-interest topics identified by the individuals we consulted in the early planning stages of Phase I.

Identification of Potential State Organizations. The procedures used for identifying potential state organizations consisted of the following:

- The National Rural Education Association (NREA) provided a mailing list of all state organizations holding affiliate status. In the winter of 1993, fifteen state affiliates were members of the NREA.
- The Southern Rural Education Association (SREA) was also contacted to establish whether or not states represented by SREA had a state rural education interest group that was not affiliated with NREA. This step resulted in the identification of two potential state organizations.
- Other sources contacted include the American Association of School Administrators, two of the regional educational laboratories (Appalachian Educational Laboratory and Research for Better Schools), and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural and Small Schools. These efforts produced two additional potential state organizations not previously identified.

The discovery process outlined here, that extended over several months, resulted in the identification of nineteen potential state rural education interest groups, as shown in Figure 1.

Data Collection. Survey instruments were mailed to the state organizations as they were identified in the processes outlined above. Ten state organizations responded to the initial request for participation. Follow-up activities (both written and telephone) were conducted in the late spring and early summer months of 1993, resulting

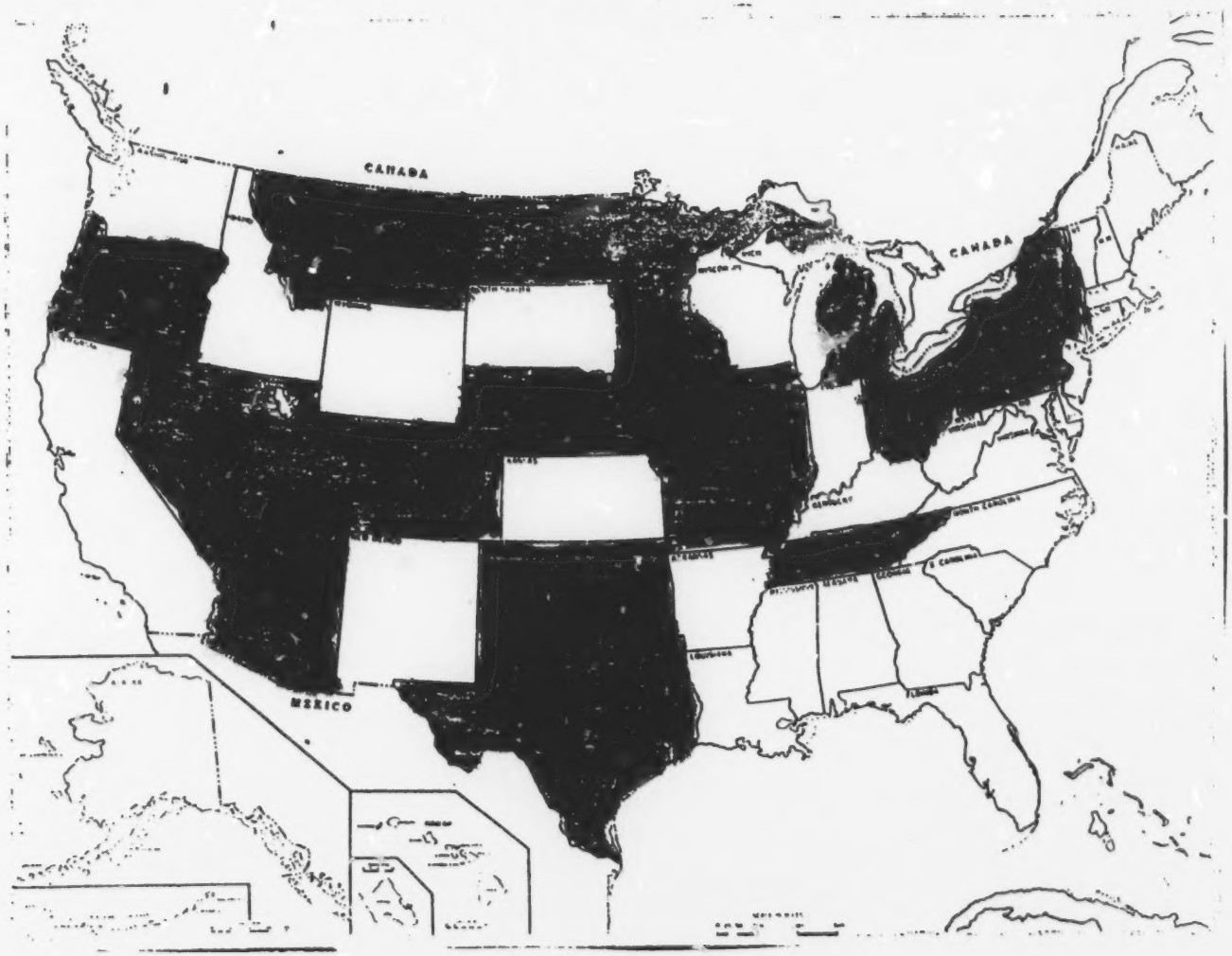

FIGURE 1

POTENTIAL STATE RURAL EDUCATION INTEREST GROUPS
1992-93

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in the addition of three state profiles. This report, then, includes information on thirteen of nineteen potential state rural education interest groups, or a 68 percent return rate (see Table 1). Fortunately, the thirteen participating states include several (e.g., Minnesota, New York, and Pennsylvania) widely acknowledged as having very active organizations. Also of importance, the thirteen include several state groups either newly formed or in the very early stages of formulation. A representative mix of states are thus included in this first descriptive report.

TABLE 1

STATE ORGANIZATIONS PARTICIPATING IN PHASE I

State	Title of Organization
Arizona	Arizona Small Schools Organization
Illinois	Association of Illinois Rural and Small Schools
Michigan	Michigan Rural Education Association
Minnesota	Minnesota Rural Education Association
Nebraska	Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association
Nevada	Nevada Rural School District Alliance
New York	Rural Schools Program
North Dakota	North Dakota Small Organized Schools
Oklahoma	Organization of Rural Oklahoma Schools
Oregon	Oregon Small Schools Association
Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools
Tennessee	Tennessee Small School Systems
Texas	Texas Rural Education Association

SECTION TWO: FINDINGS

The presentation of the findings of this initial phase of our investigation stresses the following:

- major organizational and operational features of the thirteen organizations (data on the practices of individual state groups are reported in a series of sixteen tables in Appendix A, formatted to permit comparisons among all thirteen states)
- in several instances we also include detailed descriptions of what we judge to be especially noteworthy organizational features and practices of individual state organizations, or a small number of state organizations; highlighted here are characteristics viewed to be unusual relative to both the norms of the entire group of thirteen as well as those that strike us as usual, perhaps even exemplary, practices relative to the situation to be found among special interest groups in education generally.

Formulation

A clear pattern is evident regarding the time period when a majority of the thirteen organizations were created. Eight of the thirteen were formed in 1985 or later. The oldest of the thirteen is the Oregon Small Schools Association, established in 1974, followed in 1975 by the Rural Schools Program in New York State. The Texas Rural Education Association is the newest of the thirteen, having been formed in December of 1992, just several months prior to the beginning of our data gathering efforts.

When formed, none of the thirteen organizations replaced an existing state organization representing rural interests in their respective states. All reportedly reflect a new coalescing of individuals or organizations around the common interest of promoting a rural education agenda of some type.

Mission, Purpose, and Goals of the State Groups

A number of common themes concerning the mission, purpose, and goals of the state rural education interest groups are regularly expressed in the constitutions and by-laws of these organizations that were submitted as background material for this initial exercise. Though the emphases differ, as does language usage, it is clear that there was a consensus among the key stakeholders in the formation of the units that the organizations were to:

- serve as advocates for rural education in their respective states
- develop and pursue state rural education policies that would promote the interests of rural education
- offer technical assistance to rural educators so that they can improve the quality of the programs and services offered to rural school students
- engage in the research and analysis of contemporary issues facing rural education.

These four broadly stated purposes would seem to capture the major emphases of most of the state groups. One additional purpose of the Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools that does appear to be unique is the reference in its by-laws to the organization pursuing

litigation in both federal and state courts "for the protection of the rights under existing law of school districts, including rural and small school districts...and of the students served thereby" (By-Laws of the Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools, p. 2).

Governance

Fairly customary governance arrangements are used by the state rural education organizations. That is:

- The vast majority (twelve of the thirteen) have a traditional slate of officers consisting of a president, vice-president, and either a separate secretary and treasurer, or a combined position of secretary-treasurer; these positions are generally filled by an election, though the secretary and treasurer, or secretary-treasurer is frequently appointed by the officers or an executive committee.
- Most have an executive committee that consists of the officers and additional directors who are elected by the membership (two states elect their directors to represent geographic regions of the state).
- The use of standing committees varies with eight of the states having one or more; members of standing committees are either elected or appointed.

These governance features are established in the constitution and by-laws of the organizations, as expected. The role and function of the officers and executive committees are typically those assigned to comparable positions/committees in most organizations.

Affiliations

The inquiry on the extent to which the state organizations maintained an affiliate status with other state as well as national groups established several patterns. At the state level:

- A majority of nine of the groups in 1992-93 did not have an affiliate status with another state education interest agency.
- Two of the four (Arizona and Michigan) that did, affiliated with their respective state organizations of school administrators, with the former broadening its state relations even further by also affiliating with the state school boards association.
- Two of the four (New York and Pennsylvania) were affiliated with state coalitions representing interests much broader than the field of education.

At the national level, almost all (twelve of the thirteen) were affiliated with the National Rural Education Association (NREA), in part, no doubt reflecting a concerted effort by NREA in recent years to promote the creation of parallel state level organizations, a practice followed by most of the major national professional education associations, as well as interest groups in other fields.

Composition and Size of Membership and Dues Structure

Concerning the composition of the membership of the thirteen state organizations in 1992-93:

- A strong majority, or eleven of the thirteen, open up their membership to local school districts, individuals, and other

organizations/institutions in the state. The two exceptions to this practice are in Oklahoma and Pennsylvania, the only groups to explicitly indicate that their membership is limited to local school districts.

- Most of the state groups that reported changes in their total membership of all types for 1992-93 compared to their initial year of establishment indicated that the membership has increased, in some cases substantially.
- While the total membership size of a number of the state groups appear to be relatively small, others (e.g., Illinois, with a reported 719; Nebraska and New York, both with a reported 300 plus; and Oklahoma, with a reported 251) are substantial, in both relative terms, and in an absolute sense.

A mixed pattern is evident with regard to membership eligibility requirement:

- As established above, Oklahoma and Pennsylvania, both of whom limit their membership to a local school district, report further that the district must be defined as rural. The Minnesota , Nevada, New York, and Oregon groups also carry the same stipulation regarding local district membership status.
- Several state organizations establish a maximum enrollment size for local school membership (1,650 in K-12 in the case of Oregon, and less than 1,000 in the case of Texas).
- Five of the thirteen organizations indicate that they have no membership eligibility requirements.

Variations are also evident concerning the membership dues structures of the thirteen organizations in 1992-93:

- As expected, the state groups that limit their membership to a local school district tend to have a higher dues structure than those that do not.
- Only three states (Illinois, Minnesota, and Oregon) employ a graduated dues schedule for local school district membership.
- Also as expected, the dues schedule for other organizations/ institutions in those states maintaining this category of membership tends to be higher than that for individual membership.

The Executive Officer

Slightly more than one half, or seven of the thirteen responding state organizations, employed an executive officer during the 1992-93 school year. Highlights of the role and function and other features of these positions include:

- Only one of the seven (Minnesota) was employed full-time. The executive officer in New York devoted ninety percent of his time to the organization. The time devoted by the remaining number varied from fifty percent in one case to four hours per week in another.
- The average tenure of the executive officer was approximately three years.
- Most of the seven have had prior experience in public education, especially prior administrative experience; one (North Dakota)

previously served as the executive director and counsel of the state school boards association.

- As expected, the highest salary earned by the seven executive officers were those paid to the one employed full-time (Minnesota, $45,000), and the one employed nearly full-time (New York, $45,000). The salary of part-time executive officers ranged from a high of $18,000 per year to a low of $3,900. One executive officer (Nevada) is employed full-time by a post-secondary institution; the salary of another (Oregon) is paid by the state education agency.
- The principal functions of the executive officers in 1992-93 centered on legislative work and organizational maintenance. Included in the latter category are the traditional roles of communication with the membership, planning for the annual convention, and networking with other state organizations.

Other Salaried Staff and
Use of Contracted Services

Only one of the state groups (New York) employed on additional full-time staff person in 1992-93, in this case, an office manager. Four additional state organizations, however, employed an additional part-time staff person. These were the state groups in Minnesota, Nevada, Oregon, and (again) New York. These part-time staff positions generally provided administrative assistance to the executive secretary.

Six of the state organizations also entered contracted service agreements with others in 1992-93. In a majority of these cases, contracted services were entered into for the provision of legislative

monitoring and assistance. Two of the organizations also contracted for the publication of their newsletter.

Housing

Eleven of the thirteen state groups maintained a central office in 1992-93. The most commonly reported practice was to locate the central office in donated space provided by a local school district (in five cases and generally that of one of the officers) or by a post-secondary institution (in three cases and generally that of a faculty member who also serves as a part-time executive director of the organization). In two instances, donated space in the home of the executive secretary served as the central office of the organization. None of the organizations at this point in their development maintained one or more field offices.

Programs and Services

A number of commonalities are evident in the 1992-93 programming characteristics of the state rural education interest groups. For example, concerning the traditional practice of the sponsorship of an annual state convention:

- All but one (North Dakota) of the twelve functioning for the full 1992-93 year (recall that the Texas group was just created in late 1992) held an annual convention.
- The annual conventions tended to span multiple days (with 1.5 or 2.0 days being the most common format), and were generally held

as separate events for the membership, as opposed to the joint sponsorship with another state organization.

Concerning another relatively traditional service provided by professional associations, the publication of a membership newsletter:

- A majority, or nine of the twelve groups in full operation in 1992-93, published a periodic newsletter. The publication schedule tended to be structured (e.g., monthly or quarterly).
- Two state organizations (Minnesota and Nebraska) also published a bi-weekly newsletter throughout the duration of the legislative sessions in their respective states.

Other reported programs and services offered by the state groups as part of the annual dues include:

- an Illinois program that awards special recognition to rural teachers, administrators, board members, and "friends of education"
- a practice engaged in by the Michigan group that includes the membership dues for the National Rural Association as part of its state dues structure
- an Oklahoma program that assists member schools in the development of board of education policies
- a Pennsylvania program that provides assistance to rural districts in temporary superintendent searches
- the sponsorship by several of the state groups (Minnesota, Nevada, Oregon, and Pennsylvania) of special training sessions and workshops and seminars.

Two of the state organizations also reported the provision of services to the membership for which special charges are made: The New York organization will conduct special school district studies on a broad range of topics on a negotiated fee basis; and the Pennsylvania group that also conducts special school district studies, but at this time the emphasis of rural school district operations is on fiscal aspects (e.g., budget development and analysis).

Annual Budget and Sources of Revenue

Ten of the organizations provided information on their 1992-93 annual budgets (two of the remaining three reported that they did not have a budget). Highlights of the financial posture of the ten reporting states include:

- Three of the ten (Minnesota, New York, and Nebraska) were the only state organizations having annual budgets in excess of $100,000.
- An annual budget in the range of $50,000 to $100,000 was available to an additional three states.
- Three state groups had an annual budget of less than $10,000.

Clear patterns are evident regarding the primary sources of revenues available to the state groups in that:

- Eight of the ten states derive 85 percent or more of their annual budget from membership dues.
- The annual convention sponsored by a state group is a major source of revenue for two states, generating fifty percent or

more of the annual budget for the Nebraska and Nevada state groups.

- Only two states, New York and Oklahoma, derive revenues from the sponsorship of workshops and seminars; and only three states appear to have sufficient operating monies to derive limited revenues from earnings on deposit.

The heavy reliance of the state groups on dues and the sponsorship of an annual convention, and not on the conduct of workshops or seminars or publications, is consistent with the program priorities the organizations have identified in the relatively early formative years of their existence.

Special Assessments

Three of the thirteen state organizations reported that they made use of a single special membership assessment in 1992-93. Two of these, Pennsylvania and Tennessee, did so for the purpose of putting together funds for the initiation of a legal challenge to the existing state financial support system for local school districts. Both assessments are voluntary and consist of a special assessment based on a per-pupil enrolled formula ($1.00 per student in Pennsylvania and $1.50 per student in Tennessee). Nonmember districts in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania are also eligible to participate in this legal challenge, and many districts have done so, including a number of the state's larger enrollment size districts.

The third state organization making use of a special assessment in 1992-93 is the Minnesota group. This practice, also voluntary, was a

$500 per member district assessment to underwrite contracted services for legislative monitoring.

SECTION THREE: DISCUSSION

We have organized our discussion of the results of this initial probe of the organizational and operational features of the emerging state rural education interest groups around three major themes:

- First, we discuss what appear to be the overall priorities of the relatively new organizations and, then, offer tentative observations concerning the programming mix assumed by the state groups. These should be of value in shaping subsequent inquiries, particularly the selection of a small number of state groups for the case study phase of the paper.
- Then, tentative observations are offered concerning what we regard to be important characteristics of the organizational capacity of state rural education interest groups. This discussion should also prove to be of value in framing subsequent research hypotheses concerning the workings of such organizations, especially the ultimate need to undertake the design of assessments of their effectiveness.
- Finally, we consider factors that seemingly have contributed in recent years to the virtual explosion of the state level groups. Though this line of inquiry was purposefully not pursued in this initial work, completion of this phase suggests several tentative observations concerning this complex matter that are to be explored further.

Programming Priorities

An overview of the programming mix of twelve of the thirteen state organizations (all except the newly created unit in Texas that had not functioned for a full year) is presented in Table 2. We build the table to illustrate the extent of involvement of the state rural education organizations in nine of what are judged to be common functions of state, not national, level special interest groups in education. State level comparisons are used here for the reason that most major state special interest groups in education that we are aware of do not attempt to offer a full range of programs and services. Rather, many special services not cited in the list of nine, are available to members of state associations by virtue of their affiliation with a national organization (e.g., group insurance programs, professional liability insurance, reduced hotel/motel and car rental rates, tour programs). A four-point scale is used to establish the extent of involvement of the twelve state groups when looked at as a collection (limited, moderate, majority, extensive).

It should be stressed that while the overview presented in Table 2 achieves one of the primary objectives of the first phase of our work in this area (establish programming patterns and trends of state rural education interest groups), it says nothing about the quality and effectiveness services performed by the organizations in the nine functions listed. Nor do the data reveal anything about the frequency in which the groups engage in an individual activity, the organizational resources committed by the groups to an individual activity, and other interesting issues. These questions must await further work.

TABLE 2

OVERVIEW OF EXTENT OF USE RURAL EDUCATION GROUPS
OF COMMON FUNCTIONS OF STATE LEVEL INTEREST GROUPS IN EDUCATION

Common Functions of State Level Special Interest Groups in Education	Extent of Use by State Rural Education Interest Groups[1]
1. offer training, workshops, and seminars	moderate
2. sponsor annual state convention	extensive
3. offer technical assistance	limited
4. publish newsletter	extensive
5. undertake research and policy analysis	limited
6. provide legislative monitoring services	majority
7. develop legislative proposals/platform	limited
8. provide liaison services to and collaborate with other state groups	extensive
9. grant special awards and honors programs	limited

Note:
1] limited = less than one-fourth of twelve organizations (newly created group in Texas is excluded)
moderate = less than one-half
majority = more than one-half
extensive = more than three-fourths

A number of tentative observations concerning current programming practices are offered. The sponsorship of an annual state convention and the publication of a newsletter are clear choices of the state groups, most of whom should certainly be regarded as in the early formulative stages of development. The early implementation of these two functions was likely viewed as prerequisite steps by the initiators of the state groups as essential first steps to give the organization legitimacy and visibility in the state, enhance membership campaigns, generate resources, and, in the particular case of the publication of a newsletter, maintain communication in the organization and with others.

We tend to view the moderate or limited involvement of the state groups in a number of the nine functional areas as a function of the very limited resources available to most, the limited human resources available to many, as well as the relative newness of many. The provision of technical assistance to the membership, for example, ordinarily requires staff expertise to initiate, as does the offering of training, workshops, and seminars. Similarly, the undertaking of research and policy analysis studies clearly requires both human and fiscal resources.

The limited involvement of the groups in the sponsorship of what ordinarily is a relatively low-cost effort, the granting of awards and honors, does come as somewhat of a surprise. The recent growth of this practice in many national professional associations, as well as the prominence given to the values of doing so in the professional literature would also suggest that this is something organizations, both old and new, would ordinarily be expected to engage in.

A mixed situation appears to be present with regard to the extent of involvement of the organizations with regard to the two potential legislative roles used here -- provide legislation monitoring services (a majority do so) and develop legislative proposals or a legislative platform (only a limited number reportedly do). This latter finding is perhaps the biggest surprise of this initial survey. The pursuit of legislation favorable to rural interests is given great prominence in the stated goals and purposes of the organizations. Yet few apparently do much to help shape the education agenda in their respective states.

The limited role of the organizations in crafting a legislative action program is no doubt explained in part by the absence of a staff to initiate and implement such an effort. It may also in part be accounted for by a rather strict interpretation of the Internal Revenue Service's regulations governing tax exempt organizations that prohibits the involvement of such groups (five have 501C status) in influencing or hindering the passage of legislation (but does not prohibit developing a wish list or commenting on a piece of legislation). The puzzling nature of the groups' involvement in the legislative arena will of course be one of the centerpieces of subsequent inquiries of the workings of state rural education interest groups.

Influencing policy decisions is of course the raison d'etre for a special interest group, and the activities of the Minnesota Rural Education Association (MREA) would seem to be unmatched at this point in the development of the state rural education groups. For a number of years the MREA has received a $500 annual voluntary donation from its local school district members to aid its efforts to shape state policy

debates. These funds are used to support contracted services that clearly facilitate the MREA's ability to monitor legislation, as well as provide timely analyses of the implications of proposed legislation for its membership that are usually reported in a newsletter published weekly during the legislative session. These activities illustrate the MREA's involvement in two of the previously cited nine common functions of state level interest groups in education. The work of the MREA appears to be exemplary among the state organizations included in this report.

These two roles are no doubt enhanced by another practice followed by the MREA that represents a third standard used here in the framing of tentative observations concerning the workings of state rural education advocacy groups. Each year the MREA develops a legislative platform, its own wish list of legislative action judged by the membership to be friendly to the rural districts of the state. In the past, the legislative platform was adopted at the annual convention, held in the fall preceding the January start of a new legislative session. Beginning this year, a series of ten regional meetings will be held preceding the state meeting at which time legislative proposals will be introduced. Members will be asked to vote on the proposals by mail ballot prior to the annual convention (The Voice, August 18, 1993).

On the Organizational Capacity of the Twelve to Have Influence

We now offer our preliminary observations on the ability of the emerging state rural education interest groups, at this point in their development, to have success in achieving their goals and objectives.

The criteria we use stresses four characteristics having to do with the organizational capacity of the groups. An emphasis on the organizational capacity of an interest group, as well as the four features used here, are generally viewed in the literature as key variables that seem to account for much, but not all, of the success of interest groups in the American political system. This is true whether one is exploring the influence of interest groups at the national, or, as is the case here, state level.

The four criteria relate to:

- an adequate size of the organization, a critical mass of members to influence public opinion, or equally important, sway policy makers (especially because most public sector interest groups have little or no effective means to exercise sanctions against unfriendly office holders)
- an adequate, and definite, financial support base to engage in the nine common functions of state level interest groups in education identified previously
- an adequate management and leadership support system to assist in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the nine common functions
- finally, and probably the most important of the four criteria, a common vision and commitment to the mission of the organization that is widely held among the membership.

As was true of the preceding discussion of programming priorities of the state groups, the tentative observations offered here consider all twelve of the organizations (all except Texas) who were functioning

for the full 1992-93 school year as a group, consistent with the goal for this initial phase of our work (which is to set the stage for the development of research hypotheses that are then to be followed by a number of individual state case studies). This procedure of course has costs as well as benefits. To partially offset the costs, we identify notable exceptions to the aggregate profile that is established.

Our tentative observations concerning the existing organizational capacity of the state organizations, as we are measuring this construct here, are presented in Table 3. Major considerations made in the development of the profile for each of the four criteria were:

- the criterion of adequate size: the absolute number of members in a state, and (especially) the number of rural local school districts as a percent of the potential rural school district in a state
- the criterion of adequate and definite financial support base: an amount of monies ordinarily required to support at least a part-time executive officer, and underwrite the assumed minimal costs of engagement in at least three of the nine common functions
- the criterion of adequate management and leadership support system: the presence of at least a part-time executive officer serving a minimum of one-fourth time
- the criterion of a common vision and commitment: the adoption of a constitution and by-laws, and (especially) whether or not a state group attempts to implement at least a majority of the nine common functions

TABLE 3

OVERVIEW OF ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY OF
STATE RURAL EDUCATION INTEREST GROUPS IN 1992-93

Criteria	Tentative Observations	Noteworthy Exceptions to Aggregate Profile
adequate size	a serious constraint on majority of organizations	Illinois, Minnesota, Nebraska, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon
adequate and definite financial support base	a serious constraint on majority of organizations	Minnesota, Nebraska, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania
adequate management and leadership support system	a serious constraint on majority of organizations	Minnesota, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania
common vision and commitment to mission	a strength of strong majority of organizations[1]	

Note:

1] As used here, a strong majority is defined to mean that the criterion applies to three-fourths or more of the twelve state organizations functioning for the full 1992-93 school year (all except Texas).

One could of course dwell on the less-than-encouraging profile presented, but we do not, primarily for two principal reasons. In the first instance, it is important to recall that most of the state groups are in reality very young organizations, only now beginning to acquire the wherewithal to pursue a more ambitious agenda. While our position on this matter may be more of an expression of hope than a valid projection, we think not. Moreover, the largely negative forces impacting rural America and, by extension, rural education, will likely accelerate in the years ahead. As a result, the necessity for rural interests to come together in more effective ways than in the past will be more widely acknowledged. This should result in a strengthening of many of the state groups, particularly those in the embryonic stage of development.

The second, and more important, reason we are not overly depressed with the current status of the twelve state groups has to do with the important consideration that rural education interests clearly enjoy the terribly critical, advantageous position of having little difficulty in arriving at and vigorously maintaining a common commitment to do whatever is necessary to preserve their identity. This characteristic can be documented in countless ways all across this country during the past few decades. It is more than likely that the flurry of activity just now beginning to be evident in many states to launch an organizational initiative to serve as an advocate for rural interests, as well as a countervailing force in state policy making, represents the front edge of what could be a powerful new movement. At least this much is clear: There are in a number of states a small handful of highly

dedicated and effective individuals, usually volunteers, who are determined to create an organizational response that promotes their common interests.

Moreover, one frequent strategy employed by interest groups in all fields to expand their influence is to collaborate with other organized groups sharing common concerns. The use of this time-honored strategy of course has merit regardless of the size and resources available to an interest group. The effective use of the strategy can also contribute to minimizing the concerns we raise here regarding the organizational capacity of the state rural education interest groups. While only two of the state groups would appear to have institutionalized formal arrangements with other groups, we believe that far more than this number do engage in (largely informal) networking efforts. The nature and effectiveness of both the institutionalized and informal collaborative efforts must be fully examined in subsequent attempts to assess the workings of the state organizations.

Factors Contributing to the Rise of Rural Interest Groups

Uncovering the set of factors that account for the emergence of state education interest groups will no doubt prove to be very elusive, for it is very likely that these are found to be largely state-specific. That is, while there are a number of commonalities in the state context in which the groups were formed (e.g., large numbers of rural school systems, specific state reform initiatives that challenge the institutional capacity or the very existence of rural systems), there are also substantial and very significant differences among the states

where a rural education interest group was formed in recent years (e.g., the political traditions found in a particular state).

Having acknowledged the need to be state-specific in uncovering the particular set of conditions giving rise to the formation of state rural education interest groups, however, should not be construed as minimalizing the influence of other, nationally oriented, factors. Nachtigal's (1991) discussion of what he perceives to be the major influences is especially instructive. According to Nachtigal, the overriding explanation "is a response to the long-term urbanization and industrialization trends which have marked this country's history since the turn of the century" (p. 395), and that further "only recently have they been perceived to be of sufficient threat to spur action" (p. 396). He then identified several of what he views to be the most significant of the changes resulting from what he refers to as manifestations of the very early control gained by urban professionals of education policy in this country determined to deal with the "rural school problem":

- a change in the goals and purposes of education
- the relentless pursuit of efficiency and effectiveness
- the erosion of local control (p. 396-399).

Other changes identified by Nachtigal as important explanations of the emergence of what he refers to as "grassroots" rural education groups are the growing commitment by rural interests that a healthy and visible rural school is a necessary prerequisite to any meaningful rural community economic development effort, and the well-documented shift of political power from rural to urbanized areas (p. 399-400).

Our engagement in this exercise suggests several other lines of possible explanations that warrant further investigation. From a national perspective, these include:

- the very slow, and still largely meager, response of federal agencies administering education programs to correct relatively newly uncovered, demonstrable "urban biases" in existing formula grants, or to respond in other ways to demonstrable needs of the nation's still large number of rural systems
- the relatively slow, and still largely limited, response of the major national education professional associations for the need to design program initiatives that target their rural school constituency
- certainly the recent advocacy of the National Rural Education Association's to establish affiliate state organizations would seem to have greatly influenced the movement. Important to NREA's role here is that it could cite and hold up as models what clearly are exemplary illustrations of very effective existing state groups (e.g., Iowa's pioneering People United for Rural Education, formed in 1977, and the Minnesota Rural Education Association, established in 1985).

From a state perspective:

- Certainly the well-documented, greatly accelerated state activity in education has caused rural interests to increasingly (and correctly so) look to their state capitals as the place to concentrate their energies. The emergence of the state as the primary actor in education policy making in this country has been

commented on by many students of school governance who have examined this trend for much of the last two decades (e.g., Mazzoni, 1977-78 and Guthrie and Reed, 1991).

- As is the case with the federal government, many state governments have been slow to respond to demonstrable inequities in (especially) state aid formulas, or have been seemingly insensitive to mounting meaningful policies that address the rapidly changing context in which rural systems must function.

A final possible explanation for the rapid growth of rural education interest groups that probably cuts across both the national and state perspectives we are using here is related to the clear fragmentation of the professional community that has occurred both nationally and in many states over much of the past three decades. As mentioned earlier, rural interests were late in joining a movement that now pervades virtually all facets of the profession. While it is probably true that the composition of the "iron triangle" has changed in recent decades, it would also appear that the current iron triangle in education, whatever its correct membership, no longer enjoys the monopoly to speak for education that it once did. Operating around the edges are a host of single-purpose interest groups representing virtually all facets of the community. Many of these have impressive track records serving as countervailing forces in the shaping of education policy. Rural education interests, though perhaps late in joining the trend, have no doubt observed these events and are now going on with the task of organizing themselves to speak for their interests.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The profile of state rural education interest groups presented here gives emphasis to the organizational and operational features of the organizations in an attempt to establish patterns that should prove useful as building blocks for the next phases of our planned work. We believe that we are now in a position to frame research hypotheses that can then be tested in a small number of case studies. The completion of the case studies will greatly facilitate an understanding of the conditions that promote the effectiveness of state rural interest groups in exercising influence on state policy making of concern to rural interests. We share the general proposition advanced by many observers (e.g., Thompson, 1976; Morehouse, 1980; Brewer and deLeon, 1983; Spring, 1993) that the influence of special interest groups is clearly limited and ought not to be exaggerated. Nonetheless, there is anecdotal evidence that some state rural education interest groups, functioning in particular ways, under certain circumstances, do appear to serve as effective voices in helping shape policy, or serve as a countervailing force that must be considered in policy debates. It is important that these relative success stories be more fully understood and these insights be shared.

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APPENDICES

A. DATA TABLES

B. SURVEY INSTRUMENT/PHASE I

C. LIST OF INDIVIDUALS COMPLETING SURVEY

NOTE

The appendices are not included in this version of the report. This decision was made for two reasons: the individual state data forms have yet to be edited by the state organizations; and, we are still hopeful that several promised data instruments will ultimately be completed and returned and subsequently included in the final draft. Individuals desiring a copy of the unedited data tables can make their request of the authors. The final copy of the report is scheduled for completion next month.